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Travelers, Translators, and Spiritual Mothers: Yoga, Gender, and Colonial Histories

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Abstract

Analyzing the work of women traveling to India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this essay explores the intersections of gender, race, and colonial history and connects them to contemporary cultures of yoga. It suggests that analyzing gender in colonial contexts provides a way to understand the dynamics of yoga cultures more fully, and to place them within a historical and cultural frame. As a mind-body practice that was initially becoming consumed by Western audiences and by women in the late nineteenth century and that continues to be a potent and popular practice globally, yoga in its various forms and representations can reflect how the dynamics of colonialism endure and are culturally sustained.

Keywords: Colonialism; Culture; Gender; India; Travel; Yoga

In her memoir, *The Garden of Fidelity* (1930), the British writer, Flora Annie Steel describes her encounter with a group of yogis:

> They were a queer-looking lot of men, naked and ash-smeared, their lime bleached hair done up in chignon fashion. I took care not to go within defilement range of them, and as I walked, I wrapped my skirts close round me, and once when a man brushed past me carelessly, I gave the pollution cry: 'Don't touch me …'
> A *yogi* ... said instantly: 'Sit down, *Mem-sahiba*, and talk. That won't hurt *us*, and won't hurt *you*.'
> And talk we did. I understood enough about Hindu philosophy to return fragments of Grecian; so we went on at it … when the holy men moved on the next morning there were smiles instead of scowls. Yet – after all these years – nigh on sixty – I am as far as ever I was from understanding the personalities, the mentalities of these men. There they were, as much immersed in this world as they could well be – I saw that by the way they cooked their food-and should put their general behavior down as unsaintly; and yet – they considered themselves saints ... Perhaps I wrong the genus, but I have felt unable to trust any of the *swamies* and *sunnyasies* I have met in India, save one (Steel 1930, 100-101).

Published a year after her death, Steel's text narrated her time living in India from 1867-89. Steele published popular novels including *On the Face of the Waters* (1897) and *Voices in the Night* (1900) and, with Grace Gardiner, she wrote the bestselling *Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888), a household guide that shaped domestic life for British women in India. Her

influential and diverse forms of writing reflect gender dynamics and cultural exchanges within the context of colonial relations and represent the conditions of Anglo-Indian life.

Steel's narration presents the "*yogi*" as a theatrical and exotic icon, simultaneously mystical, primitive, and symbolic of cultural difference. Often yogis, also termed "fakirs," were represented in nineteenth century images as sitting on a bed of nails, living in a gypsy-like fashion, and leading an ascetic life far from civilization.[1] Rianne Siebenga notes how such depictions were popular in magic lanterns and postcards, and "were embedded within the colonial discourse of India" as "representative of all that was wrong with Hinduism" (Siebenga 2012, 3). Kirin Narayan notes how, in colonial India, "the Hindu holy man became increasingly saturated with negative meanings, his self-torturing practices an illustration of India's spiritual and moral backwardness" (Narayan 1993, 478).

Presenting these figures as spiritual imposters and yogic curiosities, Steel's encounter presents the respectable British memsahib (wife of a colonial official) as an empowered observer of Indian culture and exemplifies the various "contact zones" within which women participated.[2] Numerous critics have studied how journeys were a freeing and mobilizing experience for women, and how travel narratives participated in the ideological construction of colonial spaces.[3] As Indira Ghose notes, "the very act of travel constituted a form of gender power for women – by entering the public world of travel, women transgressed gender norms that relegated them to the home" (Ghose 1998, 12). Steel participates in the shaping of India as a space of spiritual and bodily difference – she establishes yogic practices as available to Western audiences, but also ripe for potential colonial engagement, improvement, and amelioration. Contributing to the trope of the intrepid woman traveler, Steel's lively account depicts yogis as part of an alternative, private community of pilgrims, who *she* has the authority to know and represent. Claiming they left with "smiles not scowls," she presents herself as a mediator creating a more communal relationship with these elusive figures and implies that her daring attitude makes them knowable. Although Steel invokes the possibility of pollution through these nomadic men, she emphasizes her access to them as unique, reminding readers of her ability to venture into deep layers of Indian life and uncover its supposed trickery and falsehood.

I reference Steel to trace a trajectory of representation from travel experiences of Victorian women to transnational contemporary cultures of yoga and self-care. This is a broad task that demands greater scholarly attention. As a Victorian studies scholar, I embark upon this effort through archives of travel memoirs and health guides and through the lens of colonial and gender history. As a South Asian American yoga practitioner, teacher, and studio owner, I approach this work as both participant and critic, recognizing my role within a yoga lineage and reflecting upon my own uneasiness with aspects of contemporary yoga culture even as I contribute to it. My essay scratches the surface of an intricate cultural past in which women engaged with yoga (as a broad and varied physical and spiritual system) beginning in the fin-de-siecle. By analyzing travel accounts, lectures, yoga manuals, and biographical references, my goal is to show how yoga history – often dominated by the biographies of male figures such as Vivekananda, Krishmacharya, Iyengar, and others – can benefit from a more robust reading of gender within the complex exchanges that occurred in colonial contexts. The inflection of women's voices is simultaneously critical to understanding yoga's emerging popularity and recognizing how its practices influenced and shaped the authority and well-being of women – both within colonial India and in the spaces of "home" within Europe and America. Further, it uncovers shifting and contradictory gender dynamics; for example, the voices of elite Indian men

often colluded with those of white women travelers to effectively mute Indian women and uphold patriarchal structures within society.[4]

Thus, I study how colonial interactions and histories extend into contemporary global cultures of yoga and its complex issues of power, appropriation, commodification, and voice. Historical narratives situate India as a space of spiritual density; they often establish the woman traveler as a mobile, cosmopolitan subject of collaboration, who participates within and reconfigures emerging cultures of yoga and their representation. Referencing some of the expatriate women who were engaged in yogic pursuits through a rich archive that begins in the nineteenth century, this essay begins to trace the broadening interest in Eastern philosophies, practices, and traditions. Analyzing the appeal of yoga communities can help us understand how transnational travel experiences allowed white women – through acts of both spiritual self-discovery and community organizing – to define and shape concepts of Indian culture while also caring for and better knowing themselves.

Western Women and Empire: Foreign Bodies, Travel, and Somatic Histories

While dominant histories of yoga feature Indian men as key players (although research increasingly reveals the women who participated in its history),[5] white women are represented today as primary consumers (and increasingly producers) of the practice. I discuss the dynamics of this configuration not to reinforce gendered and racial binaries, but to show enduring historical patterns produced by colonialism. In the nineteenth century, travel was a way for many European and American women to challenge gendered expectations. Journeys to India could be liberating, and exposed them to local practices and traditions, including the cultures and communities of yoga within which their whiteness and femininity lent them unique positions of influence. Middle- and upper-class colonial women gained access to and benefited from these practices precisely because they were viewed as gentler and more intuitive representatives of colonial authority who could elevate the cultures they encountered. While many literary and historical texts present white women as fragile figures to be sheltered and protected from Indian men, the figures I discuss worked closely with local communities and represented more fluid, alternative, and sometimes contradictory dynamics of exchange. I analyze the connections between privileged white women travelers and Indian men of yoga who worked together to shift associations of yoga from the street antics of fakirs to a more respectable therapeutic and spiritual identity; these collaborations illuminate the nuances of colonial relations and allow us to see hybrid configurations of health, self-care, and yoga during this period. This relationship, highlighted in fleeting and informal exchanges such as Steel's and in the more enduring and transformative work of Annie Besant, Margaret Noble, Indra Devi (born Eugenia Peterson), and others, shows how these women participated in discourses and practices of yoga and helped to shape them, at times subsuming the voices of local Indian women or, in some cases, working with them. While memsahibs like Steel dabbled in Indian philosophies and were curious about the yogis they encountered, figures like Noble and Besant experienced India as a mobile site for immersive spirituality and potential transformation. These women challenged societal norms and provided alternative ways of thinking about gender, the body, and spiritual exploration; their travels provided a respite from Christian norms as well as freedom from the limiting expectations of white womanhood at home. Yet, while they sought to learn Indian practices and share their benefits, they also took a conservative stance toward traditional values surrounding gender and the family, in turn often upholding the oppression of Indian women. While figures including

Cornelia Sorabji, Pandita Ramabai, and Krupabai Satthianadhan were actively writing their own feminist texts in English and resisting conservative institutions that oppressed Indian women,[6] often travelers involved in reform movements and interested in yoga in this period were in favor of retaining an idealized, conservative Indian past. Their journeys provided access to a thriving network of spiritual communities immersed in systems of meditation, yoga, and a variety of self-care practices; as mobile and engaged subjects, they could be upheld as symbolic and universal figures of transformation and progress within India. Assuming the figure of spiritual mother, political ally, or bodily healer, the encounters of these powerful "new women" in India provide us with images of yoga and alternative practices of living and healing more palatable and consumable for transnational audiences.

Critics have shown the various ways that women shifted the dynamics of empire by claiming the privilege of white, female respectability, and acting as either critics and disruptors of colonial rule or willing participants within it. Ann Stoler has studied how European women reshaped the dynamics of empire, encouraging cultural divisions by asserting domestic norms and discouraging relations between colonial men and native women (1990; 1995). Antoinette Burton (1994), Inderpal Grewal (1996), Clare Midgely (2007), and others have examined the complex dynamics of race and gender within the intricacies of imperial rule exploring the tensions of complicity and resistance. Burton notes how Indian women were symbolic figures, representing the heart of Indian culture and its need for change. She writes, "By assuming a position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of the country" (1994, 118). Often, travel narratives contributed to depictions of Indian family life as repressive and in need of reform. These accounts presented the freedom of middle-class white women in stark contrast to the confinement of Indian women – while India was a site of spiritual and physical transformation for travelers, it was also imagined to be oppressive for the women born into the culture. While gendered "separate spheres" were in place in Europe and America, they could be disrupted for women abroad. Analyzing colonial exchanges helps us understand the dynamics of popular yoga culture and place contemporary depictions of fragile and flexible or, conversely, powerful and intrusive, white femininity within a historical frame. As a mind-body practice that was initially consumed by broader audiences in the late nineteenth century and that continues to be a potent and popular practice globally, yoga, in its representational mobility, can reflect how the dynamics of colonialism endure and can be culturally sustained.

Yoga, Commodity Culture, and Transnational Networks

Thus, the configuration of colonial relations in India prefigures the complex cultural tensions of race, class, and gender identity in popular modern postural yoga. Yoga currently functions as a transnational, global system and a multi-billion dollar industry in a variety of forms and is infused by images of slender, privileged, white women, particularly in media advertising. The "yoga industrial complex" is upheld by a dizzying array of images and products related to yoga and other systems of alternative and holistic therapy. Today the term "yoga" is used loosely – with offerings such as "goat yoga," yoga events in breweries and vineyards, and the inclusion of the practice in settings such as studios, offices, airports, hospitals, and schools. The visibility of yoga in these spaces tends to function in a palatable, whitewashed way and is often confused with other forms of physical fitness. Newly configured (and sometimes self-

created) poses incorporate and blend contorted movements and mudras (which hold their own deep history and are often misunderstood by audiences) and emerge within popular sequences and social media images. The term "yoga" is applied to various forms of movement and to a variety of lifestyle and self-care practices influenced by Eastern traditions. It is increasingly implicated within health and medical discourses as a therapeutic practice, within corporate settings as an antidote to stress (and, in turn, a driver for further productivity), and in venues such as festivals as an entertaining and unique consumable experience.

Yoga functions with a variety of styles and lineages, some authentic and some with intentional disconnections to its roots. It is a malleable form that converges with systems such as Pilates and aerial silk practices, and with corporate exercise forms such as FitWit and CrossFit. Representations of yoga, Ayurveda, pranayama, and meditation are often presented to audiences through Western practitioners who make them familiar in sometimes diluted and hybridized ways. Further, popular yoga provides a way in which expatriate Indians often gain varied meanings of their own culture and heritage through its depiction by Westerners in yoga classes.[7] Susanna Barkataki elucidates the discomfort she experiences in yoga classes as an Indian woman, noting how, "The practices millions of Westerners now turn to for alternative health and wellness therapies were intentionally eradicated from parts of India to the point that lineages were broken and thousand-year old traditions lost" and ways that the current state of yoga highlights "the power balance that remains between those who have access to wealth, an audience and privilege and those who have been historically marginalized" (2015).[8] The emergence of critical yoga studies is a response to these complex intersections of race, gender, and national identity; it explores the diversity of yoga histories and practices as embedded within, and reflective of, critical cultural and social questions.[9]

The colonial politics at stake in representations of India endure in our transnational moment. As Mark Singleton and others have noted, yoga is a hybrid form, influenced by the convergence of spiritual and philosophical texts, physical practices, and the introduction of gymnastics as a popular form of movement in the early twentieth century. Singleton writes,

> Yoga, as it is popularly conceived today, is the outcome of this dialogical exchange between para-religious, modern body culture techniques developed in the West, indigenous asana practice, and the various English-language discourses of yoga that began to emerge in India from at least the time of Vivekananda (1862-1902) onwards … One eventual result of such mergers was the now dominant mode of postural yoga practice (Singleton 2013, 38-39).

We also know, from the work of C.W. Ernst, Shaman Hatley, Douglas Brooks, and others that the evolution of yoga practices coincided with the development of other practices including Sufism and a variety of Tantric traditions. Thus, modern postural yoga as we know it, with its diverse influences, histories, lineages, and forms, is, and has been, influenced by the global circulation of ideas between cultures and locations. Like critiques of colonialism, our reading of yoga asks us to recognize how hybridity has been and will continue to be part of how the practice and its cultural forms are defined.[10]

While popular yoga in the West has diverse influences and generally focuses upon *asana*, the physical practice (just one of eight limbs), representations of yoga as a system also rely upon its connection to India as a spiritual epicenter and esoteric space. Srivinas Aravamudan's analysis of "Guru English" from his evocative book with this title (2006) shows how South Asian religiosity proliferated historically and was a cosmopolitan phenomenon both discursively and culturally. India has long served as a symbolic site for spiritual growth and inspiration in the

Orientalist depictions of travelers, romantic images within texts by Thoreau and other transcendentalists and, from 1960s on, in a variety of iconic images, sounds, and film depictions. Many of these popular representations show men who, through both physical and spiritual journeys, sought inspiration and knowledge from India.[11] Texts such as Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* (2007), and a variety of travel accounts, blogs, and images present women inspired to "find themselves" through retreats and yoga experiences in India, fashioning the Euro-Western white woman as spiritual adventurer expanding her intuition and knowledge through travel. While blogs and websites provide guidelines to manage such trips and avoid danger as a single woman abroad, the overarching image they produce is of India as a welcoming site for transformation, consumption, and collaboration; they also tend to present white women as universalized representatives for yoga. As Raka Shome notes, in her reading of white femininity in transnational contexts, "Central to critical whiteness studies has been the recognition that the power of whiteness is the power to remain unmarked and thus occupy a position of universality and normalcy" (2011, 114).

While a powerful and idealized "whiteness" pervades yoga culture, it also establishes notions of health and beauty. Rumya Putcha argues,

> there is a long, complicated history behind the sexualized construction of white, normative femininity and 'healthy' bodies, which stretches from early dancer-actress-icons like Joan Crawford through the housewives looking to 'relax' in the postwar era, to the insta-yogis we see today … this history reveals how normalized the belief is that some people are healthy and therefore beautiful, and that their manner of living is the ideal to which all can and should aspire (2019).

Hashtag searches such as #yogatravel, #yogatraveller, and even #yogaindia show the fit white woman, often against a spectacular beach or exotic backdrop performing a yoga pose. These images secure notions of a yoga as an empowering practice for women, but also palliate and suppress the racial, gendered dynamics at play in the cultural dissemination of its forms. They echo colonial images of the woman traveler as a mobile and effective symbol for the dissemination of yogic principles and as a powerful voice for discourses of self-improvement and humanistic evolution.

Such representations participate in a form of erasure, where yoga as a system relies upon authentic global linkages, but also seeks to dismantle its roots and produce a consumable apparatus marketable to Western audiences. Further, gendered exchanges in colonized spaces show us a long history of erasure in terms of the voices of Indian women. Notable theorists such as Parthe Chatterjee (1993) and Lata Mani (1989) have addressed how Indian women were silenced in the telling of their own stories and histories. Mani has shown that debates over practices like sati (widow burning) were dominated by Englishmen and the Indian colonial elite in ways that effectively muted the voices of Indian women.[12] Arguments over rights and traditions, particularly those involving women's bodies, could be oppressive from both colonizers and the voices of privileged native patriarchy. In the same way, discourses surrounding the body and self-care established health practices as central to the project of empire. For example, narratives by British women doctors such as Mary Scharlieb made Indian women's health and domestic practices a central forum for their own authority and focused upon spreading the norms of Western medicine in place of local traditions. A similar process occurred as women missionaries became involved in the development of schools and other institutions. Maud Diver in the frontispiece of her popular and sweeping overview of women's efforts, *The Englishwoman in India* (1909), quoted Count Von Konigsmark on the colonial engagement of

women, "what would India be without England and what would the British Empire be without Englishwomen? To these women are due the gratitude not only of their country, but also of the civilized world" (n.p.).

Antoinette Burton (1994) has argued that women were viewed as "the vessels through which moral improvement of society could be achieved" (42) and "for them, as British women, the entire globe was their purview. They considered their authority over its salvation to be as much a national as a gender prerogative, proceeding as it did from their status as British women" (48). Such colonizing gestures existed within evolving cultures of yoga and produced enduring tensions and models of inequity that continue to shape yoga cultures today.

Yoga Communities: White Women as Reformers and Spiritual Mothers

The story of yoga in the West is often told with the opening scene of Swami Vivekananda attending the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Vivekananda traveled to the West to share his concepts of Raja Yoga and to present a more sophisticated image of the Indian yogi. He helped to shift the representation of the yogi from pre-existing popular culture portrayals of fakirs to the respectable, wise, and endearing Brahminic Eastern guru. Vivekananda represented India as a space where classical traditions could coexist with knowable, translatable, and potentially unifying values for the present. Kirin Narayan writes how Vivekananda provided "the first concrete illustration that the Hindu tradition was not just frozen in misshapen forms or buried in lofty texts but continued to be transmitted by living teachers" (1993, 492).[13] Numerous accounts confirm that Vivekananda's ideas were welcomed and his presence well received. Mary Louise Burke (later named Sister Gargi) traces his extensive transatlantic travels, noting that many of his lectures in libraries and homes were well attended and hosted by women. In the opening pages of her book *Vivekananda: Second Visit to the West*, Burke writes,

> The swami was by no means unknown in the Western world. During his first visit there, which had extended from the middle of 1893 to the close of 1896, his name had become familiar to almost every newspaper reading American. By some he had been loved and revered, by others feared and reviled; but few, if any, had looked upon him with indifference. His talks … revealed to an astounded American public the moral and spiritual grandeur of India's religious culture … During the last months of 1893 and throughout most of 1894 he had traveled. Lecturing, from place to place in the midwestern, southern and eastern states of America (1973, 1-2).

Thus, Vivekananda's fame and popularity was bolstered by the efforts of women who supported his gatherings and promoted his work to expand a message of Hinduism as unifying and accessible, to connect yoga more deeply to it, and also to popularize the practices of Raja yoga to the West.

We know from the work of Margaret Noble, one of his most devoted disciples, how deeply Vivekananda inspired Western women. Her position as a woman – and as a foreigner – gained her trust as an ally who could speak more broadly to wider audiences. Kirin Narayan and others have articulated how Vivekananda invited Noble to India, gave her monastic vows, and named her Nivedita, meaning 'the dedicated.'[14] In a letter to Noble from July 1897, Vivekananda wrote about her ideal position to serve in India,

> I am now convinced that you have a great future for the work for India. What was wanted was not a man but a woman; a real lioness, to work for the Indians, women specially. India cannot yet produce great women, she must borrow them from other nations. Your

> education, sincerity, immense love, determination, and above all, the Celtic blood make you just the woman wanted (1947, 440).

Thus, Noble was bestowed with a name and a task that encouraged collaboration with Indian people with whom she was imagined to be both partner and feminine icon for the ideals of spiritual progress and yogic knowledge; she was tasked to do the "work of India" by reforming and elevating Indian culture as a white woman awarded recognition by an Indian guru. Barbara Ramusack writes that Sister Nivedita

> channeled her abundant energies and talents into many different spheres. She lectured in India, England, and the United States on topics ranging from the condition of Indian women to modern Indian art and wrote articles and books in an effort to interpret Indian culture sympathetically to wider audiences and to raise money for her school (1990, 125).

Along with the honor she received from Vivekananda, Noble was granted recognition from Sri Aurobindo, with whom she shared the fight for India's liberation. Aurobindo was a major figure in India who later in life, after many years in prison following his resistance to colonial rule, shaped his theories of Integral Yoga. Noble was just one of Sri Aurobindo's female collaborators; his sustained work was with Mirra Alfassa (a global figure of Turkish-Egyptian Jewish origin born in Paris who traveled to India from France). She became the Mother of Sri Aurobindo ashram, was devoted to the cause of yoga as a force for human evolution and social change, and created the still active utopian yoga community of Auroville. These women were granted important roles within ashrams and represented a neutralized "outsider" perspective as they immersed themselves within Indian culture; indeed, they also show us the transnational and cross-cultural relationships that emerged in early yoga communities and the efforts for progress within them. Texts such as Sarala Bala Sarkar's *Nivedita as I Knew Her* (1914) reveal how Indians interacted with Margaret Noble, and documents from the Sri Aurobindo Society note how the efforts of local Indian women were central to activities of the ashram and within social justice efforts of the period. Sarala Devi, for example, worked with Aurobindo and also developed her own physical training programs influenced by martial arts. We can see from photos in the Sri Aurobindo archives that Devi "took the lead in organising a physical training movement in Bengal similar to the one she had seen in Maharashtra. She set up a gymnasium and appointed a famous gymnast of Goa to train the members in sword and lathi play" (*Site of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother* n.d.). Indian women like Rukmini Devi Arundale, who was married to an Englishman, were also active within the Theosophical Society and granted titles of "World Mother." While historical records show the dominant roles of foreign women within these communities, there was also some intermingling and collaboration with Indian women who also worked toward the expansion of activities related to yoga in the period. Thus, there is much more we have to learn about the complex and nuanced exchanges that shaped these communities and the hybrid cultures that came together within them.

Noble, like Annie Besant, Mirra Alfassa, and others, promoted yoga as a philosophical and spiritual concept and method that could produce effective change. These women saw India as home, often challenged British imperial influence, and argued that independence was critical to India's evolution. They were sympathetic to the spiritual ideas that were presented in ancient yogic texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*. Besant, as the President of the Theosophical Society, was widely known as a writer and lecturer; her efforts produced arguments for Western readers about the scientific value of yoga. Notably, in her *Introduction to Yoga*, a series of published lectures, Besant writes that "yoga is a science of psychology" (1908, 78) and claims in the forward that, "the Sutras of Patanjali, the chief treatise on Yoga … may,

however, also serve to give the ordinary lay reader some idea of the Science of sciences, and perhaps to allure a few towards its study" (n.p.). Noble also highlighted the relevance of ancient texts, referring to Patanjali's work as "the great psychology." Noble writes, "it is the perfect compatibility of the Hindu religious hypothesis with the highest scientific activity, that is to make that country within the present century the main source of the new synthesis of religion for which we in the West are certainly waiting" (1904, 42). As Sumangala Bhattacharya has argued, while Besant may have been excluded from mainstream science, "Eastern thought offered an alternative route to knowledge production" and her study of Theosophy and "arcane Hindu philosophies in India contributed to her conviction that Indian occult practices could be harnessed in ways that intersected with, and even transcended, the work of conventional Western science" (Bhattacharya 2017, 199). Tracing links to Western psychology and theories of cognition, Besant and Noble highlight the value of ancient knowledge to our understanding of the present and they encourage their English readers to participate in yoga as a powerful, scientifically rigorous system and a way of better knowing oneself and the world.

Besant and Noble were revered and welcomed into Indian society as saviors for India itself – and yet, they had deeply conservative opinions about Indian womanhood and an idealistic notion of India and its past. As Kumari Jayawardena argues in her groundbreaking work,

> The phenomenon of 'white sisters' and 'holy mothers' was extraordinary. While they were absorbed in Indian society and culture, outliving their gurus and making India their home, they also introduced modern, European methods of education, modernism in art, and an appreciation of Western music and culture. They were not only white women 'appropriating' the other in religion and culture, but were persons with a vision of a politically independent new India. A change of persona was symbolized by their change of name and lifestyle; they moved from being rebels in Europe to nationally honored persons in India (1995, 180).

Barbara Ramusack (1990) has noted that Besant and the Theosophists idealized the Hindu wife and mother, and they worked to uphold oppressive patriarchal structures even as they succeeded within them. Jayawardena and Ramusack show the privileged position these women held in India – their activities reveal their deep appreciation for yoga philosophies and practices, as well as the entitled ways in which they were upheld as figures representing Indian culture. Further, as Gauri Viswanathan has shown, Besant's Theosophical work in India provided opportunities for comparative religious thinking, an expanded sense of consciousness, and support for Indian nationalism, yet she held an "undisguised partiality for a brahminical, aryanized Hinduism" (Viswanathan 1998, 206).

Vivekananda exposed women abroad to yoga theories and depended upon them to spread a new vision of yoga as a respectable and valuable philosophy and practice with roots in Indian culture and history. Figures like Noble and Besant among others become active partners in the communication of yoga to the Western world, producing texts on spirituality and yogic principles. Noble published several books which traced Indian religious practices and also detailed qualities of domestic life.[15] While India – as a physical and ideological site for yoga cultures in this period – provided women travelers with opportunities to explore their own subjectivity and expand their influence (at a time when there were limits to their power at home), it also became a space where they could establish a hierarchical order of knowledge as women more "free" to roam than their Indian counterparts. While Noble, Besant, and other women of their generation promoted yogic concepts largely as a way of promoting spiritual well-being, their bodies projected notions of universalized and maternal white womanhood even as it was

cloaked in Indian garb. Their self-discovery and awareness of yoga concepts popularized them in more effective ways than Vivekananda or others could have on their own.

These women were revered, as Jayawardena has noted, as holy mothers protecting India and producing new concepts of national unity through their work. Their sympathetic stance and devotion to Indian causes and their ability to "pass" culturally gained them the respect of locals. Their presentation of yoga produced a paradox in which ancient practices and techniques became public and knowable through their translation of them, and became globally "Indianized" through their participation in the culture. And while they were vocal in claims for national independence, their revolutionary activism did not always extend to liberating women from traditional norms and values and instead upheld an idealized image of the Hindu household represented by submissive wives and mothers. Their engagement with the brilliant intellectual activists of the time and respect for yoga as a path for social justice often came at the expense of Indian women since many of their ideas encouraged upholding and romanticizing religious and cultural traditions. While they held a deep appreciation for Indian culture and yogic principles, their efforts within these communities were upheld and sustained by their positions as outsiders welcomed in and respected as representative figures of cultural reform and yogic potential.

Postural Practices and Yoga Manuals

The focus of these figures was primarily upon the esoteric aspects of yoga as ancient and embedded within Indian culture, but attainable to Western audiences as a philosophy and system of study. Like Steel, they viewed the physical aspects of yoga with some suspicion and derision. On the other hand, other women of the period were strongly influenced by the potential of *asana* and *pranayama* to produce powerful and transformative healing effects upon the human body. Genevieve Stebbins, for example, created a model of "harmonious gymnastics" that incorporated breath and yogic embodiment in relation to systems of movement and gesture influenced by Francois Delsarte. She engaged with the psycho-somatic aspects of yoga, focusing upon the power of breath and connecting aspects of Indian esoteric knowledge towards a focus upon harmonious movement and dance. In *Dynamic Breathing and Harmonious Gymnastics* (1892), Stebbins describes how Indian dancing girls "go through the most wonderful and graceful evolutions, producing everything that is possible to the harmonic poise and the spiral line" and Stebbins claims that "[e]very motion in our exercises is ancient" (66), rooting her movements in a long tradition. She discusses the mystical qualities of breathing, connecting it with the yogic practice of pranayama, "*the storing of oxygen is a mystic force, and the one we are trying to know more of*" (72, emphasis in original). Stebbins encourages readers to study the human body and its potential to evolve. Her system of "psycho-physical culture" is based upon movements from other forms and

> combined with others more occult and mystic in their nature, which have been taken from those ideal and charmingly beautiful motions of sacred dance and prayer practiced by various oriental nations for certain religious and metaphysical effects, while the whole is blended with a system of vital, dynamic breathing and mental imagery … hence the true meaning of this especial system which is, in very truth, psycho-physical, and affects, simultaneously, the body to vigorous health, the brain to powerful mental action, and the soul to higher aspiration (59).

While Stebbins and other women, including Mollie Bagot Stock, Blanche Devries (also influenced by Vivekananda), began to incorporate breathwork and movements we now associate

with *Hatha* yoga into sequences and teach them to the public, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that yoga was widely pitched to global audiences and particularly to women consumers. Indra Devi is often described as the first woman to "bring" yoga to the West and popularize it by teaching in Hollywood and publishing a number of yoga guides in English. Devi has gained attention in recent years, especially since the biographical publication *The Goddess Pose: The Audacious Life of Indra Devi, the Woman who Helped Bring Yoga to the West* (Goldberg 2016). Her life was remarkable, she studied with great masters, was student of Krishnamacharya, and traveled extensively becoming a global yoga figure. In her own writing, Devi presents herself as a spiritual traveler with striking connections to the representations we see in Steel's memoir. With titles like *Yoga for Americans* (1959) and *Renew Your Life Through Yoga* (1965), Devi's manuals for English reading audiences provided guidelines for what poses to practice and lifestyle advice that incorporated yogic concepts. In *Yoga for Americans*, she alludes to the emerging popularity of yoga but also notes how her readers were "afraid of falling into the hands of charlatans and self-appointed readers seeking advice, since there seems to be quite a number of unscrupulous and dishonest individuals who style themselves as real yogis, but who are only out to exploit the name of Yoga" (Devi 1959, ix-x). She then offers a concisely crafted six-week program designed to enhance health and learn the secret of yoga which "lies in the fact that it deals with the entire man, not just one of his aspects" including the physical, mental, moral, and spiritual conditions (xxi-xxii).

I focus here on *Forever Young, Forever Healthy* (1953), which functions as a health and domestic guide for readers and outlines ways to improve well-being through yoga. It narrates Devi's relationship to yoga through the lens of travel, presenting India as a physical, ideological, cultural, and mystical site and referring to figures like Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant who traveled there before her. While the book is a guide for readers interested in the health benefits of yoga, its early pages evoke the Victorian travel journal. She describes lunching with a friend visiting Bombay:

> 'Have you seen the yogi's camping on Chowpatty Beach?' she asked … These queer looking, almost completely naked people, their faces and bodies smeared with ashes, resembled a group of jugglers and acrobats in gray tights and makeup … they were considered holy by a great many Hindus.
>
> 'Oh, look there!' My friend exclaimed excitedly, drawing my attention to one of the men who was quietly standing on his head. 'Why on earth is he doing that?' I asked in amazement.
>
> 'But these are not real yogis,' disdainfully exclaimed a youth. 'These filthy loafers and mischief makers ruin India's good name with foreigners such as yourselves. They exhibit all kinds of baffling feats in order to attract the curiosity of tourists who open their purses to them or they pose as holy men before our ignorant crowds who worship and feed them. These sadhus merely fool the public by adopting some of the Yoga practices' (Devi 1953, 1-2).

Devi's description echoes Steel's suspicion of the "yogis" of India and the search for an authentic form of the practice. Consequently, Devi describes herself "feverishly" reading every book on India and being particularly interested in Madame Blavatsky and her work with establishing the headquarters of the Theosophical Society. Of Blavatsky, Devi writes, "The people at once had accepted her as their own. They saw in her not a haughty foreigner but a loving friend, belonging to them and their country" (3). Devi is inspired by the women who were revered as mother figures working passionately and faithfully for the Indian cause. Following the

path of travelers before her, she emphasizes how these women could effectively embrace Indian culture, publicize traditional practices, and participate within them to assist the nation to evolve.

Devi describes how yoga allows her to achieve health and higher states of consciousness. Narrating her introduction to meditation, she writes, "a complete change came over me. Gone were the pains of a tormented, troubled mind" (5). India is "the land of the fulfillment of my dreams" (6) where she would be "accepted as a regular member of the household" and in most homes was "the first foreigner to visit." She immerses herself in the culture describing how "somehow it did not seem strange to me to wear a sari, to sit on the floor, to bathe the Indian way and to eat without spoons, forks or knives, only using the fingers of the right hand" (7). Indeed, many of the photographs of Devi in her books and in archives at the Getty Collection depict her teaching yoga in a sari. She describes attending gatherings with Krishnamurti, meeting Gandhi at his ashram in Ahmedabad, and visiting a variety of locations and ashrams throughout India. Further, an amateur dance performance at a Theosophical lodge leads to acting in an Indian film and being pitched as "Indra Devi, the new rising star of the Indian screen" (9). The production of *Sher-e-Arab* (Arabian Knight) in which she played a leading part in 1930 created "the fair-skinned, blue eyed Westerner as 'Indra Devi' the new rising star of the Indian screen" (Goldberg 2016, 340).

Devi describes informally practicing yoga on a friend who she cures, but the illness transfers to Devi who then suffers weakness and heart pain. After several years of no luck with treatments, she consults a yogi who cures her within days (Devi 1953, 10-11). Thrilled by this experience, Devi pursues further training at the Kaivalyadhama Yogic Health Center and begins to share this knowledge more widely. Devi's texts highlight the therapeutic value of poses and focus upon using yoga as a relaxation technique. As her titles suggest, she presented yoga as a system that could produce youthfulness and health for Western audiences. Stephanie Syman notes Devi's success was in pitching yoga as a beauty method and elixir for youthfulness "accessible and relevant to post-war Americans" (2010, 192). As a precursor to popular contemporary self-care marketing successes such as Gwyneth Paltrow's brand Goop, Devi encouraged women to be familiar with their own bodies, presenting yoga as an exercise in knowing oneself and ensuring health and beauty. In *Forever Young and Forever Healthy* (1953) she asks women to do a self-assessment of their bodies, "remove all your clothes and begin a thorough examination of your entire body. Is there anything you don't like about it?" (117) She then presents a plan of illustrated physical movements and recommendations for how to build strength with them. Devi is often highlighted as the most notable female teacher of yoga in the West, followed by other public figures in the twentieth century such as Lilias Folen, who led a PBS yoga series in the 1970s. Devi's popularity was bolstered because she presented yoga as a unified, carefully crafted system that could be studied through books. Her ability to make the practice accessible helped to establish a tradition of the yoga health guide or handbook, which could give readers a chance to experience Indian self-care practices in much the same way as the Victorian travel journal, family health guide, cookbook, or self-improvement manual.

Moving Forward/Looking Back: Enduring Legacies and Hybrid Histories

My purpose in providing this overview – briefly explored here through some key figures – is to establish a gendered trajectory for the trope of yogic self-discovery in India, and to outline the ways that colonial histories continue to inform the vexed and imbalanced patterns of cultural representation that exist in contemporary yoga. While the figures I discuss, like many

practitioners of yoga today, honored the practice, studied its lineages and histories, and saw themselves as deeply bound to its cause, they also benefitted from positions of privilege. They had to navigate a variety of complex suppositions and assumptions about their own racial and gendered identities, and about their position as both outsiders and leaders within yoga movements, but they also helped to shape meanings of yoga and its cultural integration.

Ultimately, the essay also presents a paradox. While the writers I discuss emphasize yoga's spiritual roots and depict the fakir or yogi as a lowly street figure dependent upon physical feats, the popular shift towards *asana* in the 21st century, through conflation with fitness culture, produces an inversion; today, depictions of iconic yogis oddly mimic those of the fakir. Yoga images highlighting complex contortionist poses are reframed as idealized images of yogic purity and expertise. Yoga culture is cluttered with triumphs of physical prowess in forums such as YouTube and Instagram; while these media forums have helped to promote the work of racially, economically, and culturally diverse yoga practitioners, and make yoga increasingly visible and accessible for all bodies across the varied spectrum of fitness and ability, slender and flexible bodies performing *asana* still dominate within popular culture as the universal apex of yogic achievement. While, as I have traced here, white women had a curiously common place alongside Indian men in yoga history, today, they emerge even more fully as icons of yoga culture. And in the same ways that Victorian women forged images of India – sometimes reifying patriarchal norms and Hindu ideals of nationhood – contemporary cultures of yoga in the West often ignore the diverse and sometimes oppressive histories of the practice. Instead, it is celebrated and promoted without acknowledging current movements of Hindu fundamentalism, and yoga's increasing imbrication within a national rhetoric continues to claim the practice within a conservative and purist Hindu past. Just as colonial women travelers forged images of yoga in India in ways that often supported patriarchal norms and established Hindu ideals of nationhood, mainstream yoga representations depict the practice as a flexible, healing self-care activity (which, indeed, it is) without recognizing the ways it can be manipulated and implicated in oppressive, gendered, racialized, religious, and national histories. Yoga, as a malleable, embodied, and potentially transformative system continues to be available now, as it was then, as simultaneously a regulatory, disciplining system of individual or cultural control and a fluid, expansive, flexible anchor for mobility, freedom, and justice.

In the nineteenth century, travel offered women access to philosophies and systems of yogic self-care as alternatives to religious and cultural beliefs as well as Western medicine, an increasingly institutional system from which they were often excluded. Thus, in a moment when cultural norms and emerging medical/scientific practices restricted women's participation and sometimes stifled their capabilities and experiences, many turned to India as a site for transformation. Unlike the often regimented, prescriptive advice women would receive at home – largely the result of an increasingly industrialized, professionalized, and masculine public sphere – yoga presented more flexible and intuitive modes of living and understanding the mind and body. Yoga, like the experience of travel, provided a respite from the mundane and from gendered expectations. It promised the potential for healing, freedom, discovering dharma, energetic spiritual and physical renewal. While histories of empire frame yoga's entry into modernity and into cultures of wellness, perhaps the incredible surge in yoga's popularity today reflects our neo-liberal moment and the failures of modern technologies and medical advancements to fully address our needs and well-being. Cultures of self-care are thriving – and the ideas and values produced by them can be widely disseminated and advertised as part of expanding alternative therapies in the marketplace. Many of these remedies, rituals, lifestyle

practices, and products are rooted within and depend upon Eastern traditions as a source of beneficial wisdom, even as the cultural history of that knowledge becomes diminished or erased. And while yoga is sometimes feared as a cultish movement by religious groups, or diluted and mis-represented in popular media, it is currently a global phenomenon embedded in households, and consumed, neutralized, and upheld by a variety of individuals and communities. Accessing and, in turn, sharing the valuable knowledge that comprises yoga is a powerful and ameliorative experience; it widens our perspectives, helps us increase our potential to know and care for ourselves and others, and supports our communities in ways we desperately need. The depth, nuance, and growing presence of our yoga practices hover within a delicate balance of evolution and tradition, simultaneously operating within and across lineages, representing appreciation for cultural norms, while also producing new hybrid cultures of exchange which can participate, sometimes unintentionally, in subtle forms of appropriation bound within the webs and assumptions of a densely layered past.

Notes

[1] See the images presented in the *Photographs of India* project, and in descriptions from texts including John Oman's *Mystics and Ascetics of India* (1905). Mark Singleton describes how such images were produced through colonial exchanges, "Due to repressive measures on the part of the colonial forces in India from the late eighteenth century onwards, large groups of 'sannyasins,' 'Yogis,' and 'fakirs' (interchangeable terms in the East India Company lexicon) were forced into a life of mendicancy and yogic showmanship ... While images of such figures (first in sketches, then in photographs) had a distinct shock value for the European gaze, they were hardly the basis for a dignified Indian cultural revival" (2013, 40-41).

[2] This often-used term from Mary Louise Pratt (1992) is particularly relevant as women had access to spaces barred to men, and often highlighted these titillating spaces of contact in their writing. Travel narratives by women writers were particularly popular in the nineteenth century, as women highlighted scenes from domestic spaces – visits to women's baths and zenanas were particularly popular. Steel contributes to this tradition, following in the footsteps of figures including Fanny Parks, who also makes reference to the fakir and to the work of nautch (dancing) girls. Domestic zenanas were prioritized in the accounts of other travelers to the region including Emma Roberts, Florence Marryat, Mary Carpenter, and many others, and the manners and personal habits of people in India within domestic spaces were central in the focus of women's writing in the region.

[3] See Inderpal Grewal's *Home and Harem* (1996), Sara Mills' *Critical Terrains* (1992), Alison Blunt's *Travel, Gender, and Imperialism* (1994), Indira Ghose's *Women Travelers in Colonial India* (1998), and many others. In her book, Grewal shows how "movement within space came to be ideologically inscribed in nineteenth British culture" (4).

[4] See Parthe Chatterjee (1993), Lata Mani (1989), and others.

[5] See Reba Rakshit, who practiced *asana*, body-building, and performed as a circus figure lifting elephants. Labanya Palit Shariram is also recognized as an Indian woman who produced a book of yoga instructions in Bengali. Other figures involved in yoga movements include Rukmini Devi and Sarala Devi. In the twentieth century, Geeta Iyengar is a critical figure.

[6] These educated women were participating in fields including law and medicine, and were publishing their own memoirs and fictional texts that recounted their experiences. See Cornelia Sorabji's *India Calling: The Memories of Cornelia Sorabji* ([1935] 2001), Pandita Ramabai's *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1888) and Satthianadhan's texts, *Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life* ([1888] 1998) and *Saguna* ([1895] 1999).

[7] See the NPR story, "Yoga: A Positively Un-Indian experience," wherein Sandip Roy describes the experience of being an Indian who does not do yoga, and going to his first class in San Francisco, taught by a young blond teacher from Tennessee (2010). For more on the yoga industrial complex and cultural appropriation, see Susanna Barkataki (2015) and Shreena Ghandi and Lillie Wolf (2017).

[8] Several critics pose similar critiques of Western yoga as an appropriating practice. See Shreena Gandhi and Lillie Wolff (2017).

[9] Critical yoga studies is evolving as a rich, interdisciplinary area of study. Key texts include Elizabeth De Michelis's, *A History of Modern Yoga* (2004), Mark Singleton's *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (2013), Andrea Jain's *Selling Yoga* (2014), and collections including *Yoga, The Body, and Embodied Social Change* (Berila et al. 2016), *Yoga in the Modern World* (Singleton and Byrne 2008), *21st Century Yoga: Culture, Politics, and Practice* (Horton and Harvey, eds. 2012) and *Yoga Traveling* (Hauser 2013). Recent work in the humanities that explores yoga representation and intersections between writing, yoga, and issues of pedagogy include the work of Becky Thompson (2017), Beth Berila (2015), Jennifer Musial (2016), and others.
[10] My reading of yoga traces its origin to the classical works and history of South Asia, but questions of hybridity also emerge as more scholars and practitioners explore forms of movement and meditation practices that were also emerging in other cultures and spaces, such as Kemetic yoga.
[11] For more on this history, see Philip Goldberg's *American Veda: From Emerson and the Beatles to Yoga and Meditation. How Indian Spirituality Changed the West* (2013).
[12] See Mani (1989). Parthe Chatterjee also notes how "the 'woman's question' was a central issue in the most controversial debates over social reform in the early and mid-nineteenth century Bengal" (1993, 117)
[13] Narayan argues that figures like Vivekananda and those after him had to navigate assumptions that came from colonial texts, "Neither contorted bodies nor disembodied loci of Eastern wisdom, the flesh and blood gurus who arrived in America after Vivekananda also had to navigate through elaborate webs of suppositions spun out of preexisting strands of discourse" (1993, 494).
[14] See the critical work of Narayan (1993), Ramusack (1990), and more recently Anku Barua (2020) who writes of Noble's Hindu Cosmopolitanism.
[15] See Noble's *The Web of Indian Life* (1904).

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